

Message Text

SECRET

PAGE 01 DAMASC 02212 01 OF 02 201408Z
ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 IO-13 ISO-00 CIAE-00 PM-05 H-01
INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15
ICA-11 SSM-03 ACDA-12 TRSE-00 OMB-01 NEAE-00 /105 W
-----101718 201415Z /41

P R 201232Z APR 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7685
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
USINT BAGHDAD
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
AMEMBASSY PARIS
USLO RIYADH
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
USMISSION USUN NEW YORK
SECDEF WASHDC
DIA WASHDC

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 2212

E.O. 11652: XGDS-4
TAGS: PEPR, SY, IS, LE, PLO
SUBJECT: ASSAD'S WAITING GAME IN LEBANON

1. SUMMARY: DESPITE ACUTE EMBARRASSMENT, PRESIDENT ASSAD
REFUSED TO BE DRAWN INTO A CONFRONTATION WITH ISRAEL DURING
ITS INVASION OF SOUTH LEBANON. ASSAD HAD WARNED THE PLO
GUERRILLA GROUPS THAT THEIR REFUSAL TO IMPLEMENT THE SHTAURA
AGREEMENT MADE IT IMPOSSIBLE FOR SYRIAN FORCES TO OFFER THEM
PROTECTION. WHILE SYRIA NOW HAS A SOMEWHAT STRONGER HAND
TO PLAY IN ITS DEALINGS WITH THE PLO, FOR NOW ASSAD IS

SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 02 DAMASC 02212 01 OF 02 201408Z

UNLIKELY TO MOVE HIS FORCES TO THE LITANI SINCE HE STILL
NEEDS THE PLO'S SUPPORT IN HIS INTRA-ARAB STRUGGLE.
HOWEVER, IF THE ISRAELI INVASION POTENTIALLY STRENGTHENED
ASSAD VIS-A-VIS THE PLO, IT MOST ASSUREDLY HASTENED THE
EROSION OF HIS RELATIONS WITH THE LEBANESE RIGHTISTS. THE
SYRIANS ARE ANGRY WITH THE MANEUVERS OF SEVERAL RIGHTIST
LEADERS. KHADDAM TOLD ME THAT THE SARG CONSIDERED SARKIS TO

BE SINCERE IN HIS EFFORTS TO REALIZE CONSENSUS, BUT HE WAS FACING SERIOUS OBSTACLES XYM CHAMOUN. DESPITE SYRIAN UNHAPPINESS WITH CHAMOUN AND OTHERS, WE DO NOT BELIEVE ASSAD SEEKS AN ALL-OUT CONFRONTATION WITH THEM. HOWEVER, THIS CAUTIOUSNESS WOULD CHANGE IF THE SYRIAN LEADERSHIP PERCEIVED THAT THE RIGHTIST MILITIAS WERE HELLBENT ON FOLLOWING POLICIES GRAVELY INIMICAL TO SYRIA'S NATIONAL INTERESTS. IN DEALING WITH BOTH THE PALESTINIANS AND THE LEBANESE ASSAD'S PREFERRED TACT IS TO PLAY A WAITING GAME AND TRY TO OUTLAST HIS OPPONENTS. IT IS DOUBTFUL HE SEES THE FINAL OUTCOME ANY MORE CLEARLY THAN WE DO. END SUMMARY.

2. PRESIDENT ASSAD REFUSED TO BE SUCKED INTO A FIGHT WITH ISRAEL OVER ITS INVASION OF SOUTH LEBANON DESPITE CRITICISM AND JEERING FROM EGYPT, IRAQ, AND LIBYA. IF HIS DECISION SEEMS PRUDENT, GIVEN SYRIA'S MILITARY INFERIORITY VIS-A-VIS ISRAEL, ONE NEED ONLY CONTRAST IT WITH THE BLUSTERING OF EARLIER SYRIAN BAATHIST REGIMES TO GRASP THE EVOLUTION IN SYRIA'S REGIONAL POLICIES. IN HIS SEVEN-YEAR STEWARDSHIP PATIENCE AND PRAGMATISM HAVE COME INCREASINGLY TO CHARACTERIZE ASSAD'S POLICIES.

3. TO BE SURE, THE ENTIRE EPISODE WAS EMBARRASSING FOR ASSAD AND EVEN GENERATED SOME MUTTERED CRITICISM AMONG DOCTRINAIRE BAATHIS AND PALESTINIANS RESIDENT HERE. YET THE PALESTINIANS SHOULD NOT HAVE BEEN TOO SURPRISED AT SYRIA'S INACTION.

SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 03 DAMASC 02212 01 OF 02 201408Z

AFTERALL, ASSAD WENT INTO LEBANON, IN PART, TO AVOID WAR WITH ISRAEL.

4. IF THE FEDAYEEN GROUPS FELT ABANDONED, THEY HAD NO ONE TO BLAME BUT THEMSELVES. ASSAD PREVIOUSLY WAS EITHER UNABLE OR UNWILLING TO FORCE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SHTAURA AGREEMENT IN SOUTH LEBANON BUT HE REPORTEDLY WARNED THEM ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS THAT SYRIA COULD NOT PROTECT THEM FROM ISRAELI ATTACKS IN THAT REGION IF THEY INSISTED ON MAINTAINING UNAUTHORIZED BASES THERE. HE PROVED AS GOOD AS HIS WORD. HE WAS FURTHER UPSET THAT THE PLO ATTACKED ISRAELI CIVILIANS AT A TIME WHEN SYRIA WAS EXPECTING SADAT'S INITIATIVE TO COLLAPSE OF ITS OWN WEIGHT. YET, ASSAD COULD STILL ARGUE THAT THE VERY PRESENCE OF THE ADF PROTECTED THE PLO'S REAR BY FORESTALLING A RIGHTIST UPRISING IN BEIRUT WHICH WOULD HAVE POSED A GRAVE THREAT TO THE PLO'S MILITARY VIABILITY.

5. PALESTINIAN CRITICISM OF SYRIA'S INACTION WAS MUTED BY THE KNOWLEDGE THAT NO OTHER ARAB REGIME WAS ANY MORE PREPARED AND ABLE TO COME TO THEIR AID. THE ISRAELI INVASION HAS DEALT SYRIA A STRONGER HAND IN DEALING WITH THE GUERRILLAS IF IT CHOOSES TO PLAY IT SINCE ISRAEL MAY NOW

ACQUIESCE IN A SYRIAN MOVE TO THE LITANI. THE PALESTINIANS SEEM TO UNDERSTAND THIS. THUS, ARAFAT HAS DUTIFULLY TROOPED TO DAMASCUS AND MET WITH ASSAD EVEN WHILE FLIRTING WITH SADAT BY ALLOWING SAID KAMAL TO ATTEND AN ARAB LEAGUE FOUNDED MEETING IN CAIRO. PLO FORCES, INCLUDING THE REJECTIONISTS, SCRUPULOUSLY AVOIDED GIVING ANY PROVOCATION TO THE ADF FORCES IN LAST WEEK'S SHIYAH-AYN AL-RUMANAH FIGHTING, CONTENTING THEMSELVES WITH WATCHING THE SYRIAN FORCES POUND THE PALESTINIANS' ENEMIES.

6. IN DEALING WITH THE PLO, ASSAD IS UNLIKELY TO MOVE HIS FORCES TO THE LITANI IN THE NEAR FUTURE, HOWEVER MUCH HE MIGHT LIKE TO REIN IN THE GUERRILLA PRESENCE THERE. KHADDAM, HOWEVER, DURING MY FAREWELL CALL ON HIM, DID SEEM TO HINT
SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 04 DAMASC 02212 01 OF 02 201408Z

THAT SYRIA MAY BE CONTEMPLATING SOME FURTHER STEPS TOWARD ASSISTING SARKIS WITH THE PALESTINIAN PROBLEM WHICH COULD CONCEIVABLY INCLUDE AN EVENTUAL DEPLOYMENT OF ADF TROOPS TO THE LITANI. SYRIA, HE SAID, IS ENCOURAGING THE PALESTINIANS TO RESPECT THE LEGITIMACY OF SARKIS' LEADERSHIP. I NOTED WE CONSIDER SYRIA'S ROLE TO BE A VITAL ONE AND URGED SARG KEEP AN OPEN MIND RE ADF DEPLOYMENT TO THE LITANI. KHADDAM NOTED THAT SYRIA WAS URGING PALESTINIAN COOPERATION WITH UNIFIL AND OBSERVED THAT WHEN ISRAEL COMPLETES ITS WITHDRAWAL, A NEW SITUATION WILL BE CREATED. SARKIS WILL BE STRONGER AND THE SYRIAN CAPABILITY TO ASSIST HIM WILL INCREASE. PRESSED TO DEFINE WHAT FORM THIS WOULD TAKE. KHADDAM WAS VAGUE, REPLYING MERELY THAT IT WOULD THEN BE POSSIBLE TO HELP PUT INTO EFFECT A PLAN WHICH SARKIS HAD ALREADY DEVELOPED TO ENHANCE SECURITY AND STABILITY THROUGHOUT LEBANON.

7. KHADDAM'S HINTS OF FUTURE ACTION NOTWITHSTANDING, WE RECALL ASSAD NEVER APPLIED STRONG PRESSURE FOR IMPLEMENTING THE SHTAURA AGREEMENT ALTHOUGH WE BELIEVE HE WAS SINCERE IN HIS STATED DESIRE THAT THE AGREEMENT BE CARRIED OUT. RATHER HE IS MORE LIKELY TO SEEK FATAH'S ACQUIESCENCE TO ANY ADF MOVE TOWARD THE LITANI, THE ONE EXCEPTION BEING IF PALESTINIAN ROCKET ATTACKS FROM THE SOUTH ON ISRAELI SETTLEMENTS WERE CREATING A SITUATION WHICH COULD TOUCH OFF A GENERAL WAR. SINCE WE DOUBT ARAFAT IS PREPARED TO SURRENDER HIS LAST REDOUBT AND ASSAD STILL NEEDS THE PLO IN THE INTRA-ARAB STRUGGLE, I SEE LITTLE ROOM FOR OPTIMISM THAT ASSAD WILL SOON MOVE HIS FORCES TO THE LITANI. IF ARAB UNITY IS REGAINED, HOWEVER, THE PLO'S IMPORTANCE WILL DIMINISH AND ASSAD MAY FIND IT CONVENIENT TO STRENGTHEN HIS HAND ON THE PLO TO AVOID ANY MORE SURPRISES LIKE THE TEL AVIV RAID WHILE THE ARABS PURSUE A NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT.

SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 05 DAMASC 02212 01 OF 02 201408Z

SECRET

NNN

SECRET

PAGE 01 DAMASC 02212 02 OF 02 201507Z

ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 IO-13 ISO-00 CIAE-00 PM-05 H-01
INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15
ICA-11 SSM-03 ACDA-12 TRSE-00 OMB-01 NEAE-00 /105 W
-----103314 201518Z /42

P 201232Z APR 78

FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7686

INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

USINT BAGHDAD

AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMCONSUL JERUSALEM

AMEMBASSY JIDDA

AMEMBASSY KUWAIT

AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

AMEMBASSY PARIS

USLO RIYADH

AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

USMISSION USUN NEY YORK

SECDEF WASHDC

DIA WASHDC

S E C R E T SECTION 2 OF 2 DAMASCUS 2212

8. HOWEVER, IF THE ISRAELI INVASION POTENTIALLY STRENGTHENED
ASSAD IN HIS DEALINGS WITH THE POL, IT MOST ASSUREDLY
HASTENED THE EROSION OF HIS RELATIONS WITH THE LEBANESE
RIGHTISTS. HEARTENED BY ISRAEL'S STRICKES AGAINST PALESTINIANS
WHILE SIMULTANEOUSLY ANXIOUS ABOUT THE RESULTING MOVE NORTHWARD
OF PLO MILITARY GROUPS, THE LEBANESE RIGHT IS SEEKING A
SHOWDOWN WITH THE PALESTINIANS AND IMPLICITLY THREATENING
PARTITION OF THE SUNNI AND SHIA MUSLIMS FAIL TO BACK THEM.
EVEN AS THE HIGHT OF THE SYRO-PLO FIGHTING IN 1976, ASSAD
NEVER SOUGHT THE DESTRUCTION OF THE PLO, NOR WOULD HE TOLERATE
PARTITION NOW ANY MORE THAN HE WOULD HAVE TWO YEARS AGO.

SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 02 DAMASC 02212 02 OF 02 201507Z

SYRO-MARONITE (MIS)PERCEPTIONS OF ONE ANOTHER HAVE UNDERGONE DRASTIC REVISION AS THE RIGHTISTS HAVE COME TO REALIZE THAT THE SYRIANS WERE NOT PREPARED TO DISPOSE OF THIER PALESTINIAN PROBLEM AND WERE WORKING TO CURTAIL THEIR POWER THROUGH STRENGTHENING XHGFIS. THE SYRIANS, FOR THEIR PART, REALIZE THAT SOME RIGHTIST LEADERS ARE GOINT TO CONTINUE THEIR CONTACTS WITH THE ISRAELIS AND SEEK WAYS TO DISPENSE WITH SYRIAN PEACE-KEEPING FORCES IN AN EFFORT TO ACHIEVE THE OUTCOME THEY BELIEVE THEY DESERVE AS A RESULT OF THEIR 1976 "VICTORY."

9. KHADDAM TOLD ME THAT THE SARG CONSIDERED SARKIS TO BE SINCERE IN HIS EFFORTS TO ACHIEVE CONSENSUS BUT HE WAS FACING SERIOUS OBSTACLES FROM THE CHAMOUNISTS. "THE NUMBER ONE PROBLEM TODAY IN LEBANON IS CHAMOUN HIMSELF." IN THIS CONNECTION, HE ASSERTED THAT CENSORSHIP OF LEBANESE PRESS WAS BEING APPLIED CONSISTENTLY ONLY TO MUSLIM SIDE. I ASKED IF KHADDAM THOUGHT THAT SINGLING OUT CHAMOUN AS THE PRINCIPLE CULPRIT WAS ACCURATE-- AFTER ALL HE WAS ONLY ONE MAN. KHADDAM REPLIED "HE IS A BANDIT WITHOUT CHARACTER." IN DUSCUSSING SOUTH LEBANON, FONMIN SAW MORE GROUNDS FOR OPTIMISM CLAIMING THAT ISRAELI INVASION HAD CREATED NEW CIRCUMSTANCES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR SARKIS BY FACILITATING A MUSLIM/CHRISTIAN RAPPROACHMENT. SYRIA WAS BENDING EVERY EFFORT TO HELP THIS ALONG.

10. DESPITE KHADDAM'S EXPRESSED UNHAPPINESS WITH PART OF THE MARONITE LEADERSHIP. AND PARTICULARLY CAMILLE CHAROUN, WE DO NOT BELIEVE ASSAD SEEKS AN ALL-OUT CONFRONTATION WITH THEM. RATHER, HE CORRECTLY PERCEIVES THAT CHAMOUN AND SOME OTHER RIGHTISTS ARE MANEUVERING TO FORCE SYRIA OUT OF LEBANON AND PROBABLY SUSPECTS THEY WOULD EVEN GO SO FAR AS TO RENEW THE CIVIL WAR WITH HOPES OF STIMULATING ISRAELI AID AND INTERNATIONALIZING THE CONFLICT. THIS IS UNACCEPTABLE HERE, AND WE BELIEVE SYRIA'S HEAVY-HANDED RESPONSE TO RIGHTIST

SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 03 DAMASC 02212 02 OF 02 201507Z

PROVOCATIONS FROM AYN AL-RUMANAH WAS MEANT AS A STRONG WARNING THAT ANY SUCH ATTEMPTS WILL RESULT IN UNACCEPTABLE LOSSES FOR THE RIGHTIST LEADERS, MILITIAS, AND THEIR CONSTITUENCIES. CERTAINLY, REVENGE FOR FAYADIYYA AND A DESIRE TO LIMIT SYRIAN CASUALTIES ALSO FIGURED STRONGLY INTO THE EQUATION, BUT ASSAD IS MORE INTERESTED IN GETTING RESULTS THAN IN GETTING EVEN. HIS WILLINGNESS TO STATION SUDANESE AND SAUDI TROOPS IN SENSITIVE CHRISTIAN AREAS IN ORDER TO DEFUSE THE CRISIS OFFERS ADEQUATE TESTIMONY TO HIS DESIRE TO AVOID FULL

SACLE HOSTILITIES WITH THE RIGHT. MOREOVER, THE SYRIANS ARGUE THAT THEY ARE ONLY FOLLOWING THE INSTURCTIONS OF PRESIDENT SARKIS IN QUELQLING THE FIGHTING. MEANWHILE, ASSAD APPARENTLY CONTINUES TO MAINTAIN STRONG TIES TO FRANGIEH WHO APPEARS TO HEVE REMAINED ALOOF FROM HIS FELLOW LEBANESE FRONT LEADERS THROUGHOUT THIS LATEST ERUPTION.

11. ASSAD'S DESIRE TO AVOID ALL-OUT CONFRONTATION WITH THE RIGHTIST MILITIAS, HOWEVER, WILL CHANGE IF HE DECISED THEY ARE HELLBENT ON FOLLOWING POLICIES SERIOUSLY INIMICAL TO SYRIA'S NATIONAL INTEREST. IN SUCH AN EVENT, SYRIA WOULD BE FACED WITH CHOICE OF EITHER WITHDRAWING ITS FORCES OR ORDERING ATTACKS AGAINST THE MILITIAS AND THEIR LEADERS. WHILE SARKIS SEEMS WORRIED ATH THE PROSPECT AHT SYRIA MAY WITHDRAW IN A PIQUE. AND SOME NORMALLY SOBER SYRIANS HAVE SUGGESTED THE SAME POSSIBILITY TO US, WE DO NOT BELIEVE IT. FOR ASSAD TO WITHDRAW WOULD SET INTO MOTION EVENTS WHICH WOULD ALMOST CERTAINLY WEAKEN HIS REGIME AND THREATEN VITAL SYRIAN INTERESTS. INSTEAD ASSAD, IF CHALLENGED, LIKELY WOULD CHOOSE TO GO FOR THE JUGULAR, SEEKING A WUICK ROUT OF THE MILITIAS BEFORE OUTSIDE INTERVENTION COULD MATERIALIZE. ASSAD, HOWEVER, NEITHER WANTS NOR SEEKS EITHER OF THESE SCENARIOS, AND HE WILL CONTINUE TO CULTIVATE GOOD RELATIONS WITH SARKIS WHILE SELECTIVELY APPLYING PRESSURE AND MANEUVERING AMONG THE LEBANESE POLS IN ATTEMPT TO FORSTALL ANY SUCH EVENTUALITY.

SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 04 DAMASC 02212 02 OF 02 201507Z

12. IN DEALING WITH BOTH THE PALESTINIANS AND LEBANESE RIGHTISTS, ASSAD'S PREFERRED TACTIC IS TO PLAY A WAITING GAME AND OUTLAST HIS OPPONENTS. HE IS A PATIENT MAN WHO CAN TOLERATE CONSIDERABLE UNCERTAINTY AND AMBIGUITY IN DEALING WITH A PROBLEM WHILE CONSTANTLY SEEKING OPPORTUNITIES TO STRENGTHEN HIS POSITION. HE IS VULNERABLE IN LEBANON AND UNDOUBTEDLY KNOWS IT. IT IS QUESTIONABLE HE FORSEES THE OUTCOME ANY MORE CLEARLY THAN WE DO. STILL, HE WILL, IF AT ALL POSSIBLE, PLAY HIS WAITING GAME AND ESCHEW ADVENTURIST POLICIES. IF EITHER THE MARONITES OR THE PALESTINIANS, HOWEVER, FORCE HIS HAND, THAN HE CAN BE EXPECTED TO STRICK RUTHLESSLY (E.G. SYRO-PLO FIGHTING AND JUMBLATT'S ASSASSINATION). HE HAS TOO MUCH AT STAKE TO DO OTHERWISE.

MURPHY

SECRET

NNN

Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENTS, FOREIGN POLICY POSITION, INVASIONS, REPRISALS, LIBERATION FRONTS, COMBAT OPERATIONS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 20 apr 1978
Decaption Date: 01 jan 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978DAMASC02212
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: X4
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780169-0283
Format: TEL
From: DAMASCUS
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780436/aaaabeiy.tel
Line Count: 326
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: 3d7079aa-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: SECRET
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 6
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: SECRET
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 28 jun 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 2906959
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: ASSAD'S WAITING GAME IN LEBANON
TAGS: PEPR, PINR, MOPS, SY, IS, LE, PLO, (AL-ASSAD, HAFIZ)
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/3d7079aa-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014